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ABSTRACT

In this discussion of techniques for teaching and testing listening comprehension according to the Provisional Proficiency Guidelines of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, five questions are addressed: (1) the nature of the relationship between listening and speaking; (2) the kinds of listening tasks that should be encouraged in the classroom, by means of filmed or taped material and by means of direct contact with native speakers; (3) editing of listening materials, especially at lower proficiency levels; (4) whether the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Provisional Proficiency Guidelines for listening comprehension are sufficiently developed to yield ratable samples of a learner's listening ability; and (5) kinds of the listening test items or instruments that are most appropriate for testing listening comprehension at the various levels described in the ACTFL guidelines. A variety of testing approaches, items, and techniques are outlined and compared. (MSE)

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The Testing of Proficiency in Listening Comprehension: Guidelines for Teaching

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Since 1982 the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages has been promoting discussion and use of its Provisional Proficiency Guidelines.[1] The history of the Guidelines is presented extremely well by Liskin-Gasparro,[2] with an update by Lowe.[3] The greatest attention to date has been focused on the speaking skill through the medium of the "Oral Proficiency Interview." The other areas (reading, writing, listening, and culture) have yet to enjoy the same amount of attention and research activity, although there are healthy signs that this will change in the near future, at least for listening and reading.[4]

The purpose of this paper is to outline the guidelines for listening comprehension, and to make suggestions for the testing and teaching of listening comprehension skills.

Listening seems to be the most neglected of language skills, according to Chastain and others.[5] Ironically, it is the most immediate skill used in most modern language classes, since the development of speaking skills usually requires that students listen to substantial amounts of material before they can repeat, answer questions, or form original utterances. Even reading makes use of listening skills, especially in beginning courses. However, listening is itself a significant skill area, which can be dealt with separately.[6] The major premise here is that listening is not only the first skill in the traditional sequence of listening-speaking-reading-writing, but is also the *most basic* skill to be developed before a learner can become genuinely independent in the language, whatever skills may eventually be needed for continued study or professional advancement.

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The rest of this article deals with five questions that seem to be basic to developing proficiency in listening comprehension.

1. What is the nature of the relationship between listening and speaking?

In general, listening comprehension ability will not only precede speaking and the other skills, but will usually develop much more rapidly than speaking. This is known as the "offset hypothesis," which seems to be valid for most of the Indo-European languages taught in American schools.[7] In other words, as students often put it: "I understand everything you say, but I can't repeat it." The work of Winitz and others[8] illustrates the phenomenon of being able to operate receptively within the target language without being able to respond orally with the same degree of precision. In terms of proficiency, experience tells us that listening comprehension should be generally more advanced than speaking at all but the very lowest levels of speaking proficiency.

2. What kinds of listening tasks should be encouraged in the classroom—which by means of taped or filmed material, and which by means of direct contact with native speakers?

The best source of listening material, at least at the beginning of language learning experiences, is provided by the classroom teacher. He or she can provide "meaningful input" that is modified for student learning, as well as help students overcome the "foreignness" of the new language. The danger is that students may get so accustomed to their teacher that they will not be able to deal with other teachers, let alone with unedited utterances by native speakers. Therefore, the best source for the development of listening comprehension beyond the classroom, short of going to a country where the target language is spoken, is anything recorded, preferably material produced for consumption by native speakers, although very realistic material constructed for use in a second language class should definitely be used as well.[9]

3. How much "editing" of listening materials should be done, especially at the lower levels of proficiency?

"Editing" of listening material depends entirely on the purpose that the teacher or the examiner wishes to emphasize. Any spoken material can

be used for just about any purpose, as long as students are given realistic tasks to perform in connection with their listening. Listening to native speakers converse on their own turf at their own speed can be a thoroughly traumatic experience without the buffer of good listening comprehension tasks. For most listening comprehension material commonly in use in the United States, especially in the form of language laboratory tapes produced for first-year textbooks, the problem is not the level of content difficulty, but rather the lack of interest generated in the learner.[10] The issue is not "editing" in terms of simplification, but a matter of selecting appropriate and motivating material that yields successful learning tasks.

4. Are the guidelines for listening comprehension proficiency sufficiently developed to yield "ratable" samples of a learner's listening ability?

The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines for listening are divided into four basic levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. The Novice and Intermediate levels are further divided into three sublevels: Low, Mid, and High. The Advanced level is divided into Advanced and Advanced Plus. Underlying the four levels and their sublevels is the so-called "Functional Trisection," which describes the criteria for judging the overall "quality" of a given performance sample. The Trisection divides a sample into "Functions," that is, the language tasks that a person is expected to perform; "Content/Context," the topics and situations in which a person would be expected to operate; and "Accuracy," the degree of precision with which a given message is to be received and acted upon by the learner or candidate.

The following tables present brief descriptions of the Guidelines for listening, across the four major levels and the three aspects of the Functional Trisection.

	FUNCTIONS
Superior	Distinguishes points of view Follows negotiations Appreciates persuasion Understands counseling Responds to language tailored to audience Operates in unfamiliar situations Understands supported opinion Reconstructs hypotheses

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Advanced	Operates in survival situations involving complications Follows narration Processes description
Intermediate	Operates in simple survival situations Understands questions Responds positively (appropriately) to creative language
Novice	Understands memorized material

CONTEXT/CONTENT

Superior	All nontechnical situations Any conversation within the range of personal or professional experiences All topics normally pertinent to professional needs and social needs of a general nature Expression and defense of opinions about current events Most formal and informal conversations Practical, social, professional and abstract topics
Advanced	Particular interests and special fields of competence of the speaker (listener) Recreational activities Limited work requirements Most social situations, including introductions Concrete topics, such as work, travel, background, etc.
Intermediate	Simple question-and-answer situations Familiar topics within scope of limited language experience Routine travel needs Minimum courtesy requirements Everyday survival topics
Novice	Basic objects Weekdays Colors Months Clothing Day's date Family Time Weather

ACCURACY

Superior	Only occasional unpatterned comprehension errors Nearly perfect grammatical comprehension Occasional misunderstanding in low-frequency structures Occasional misunderstanding in most complex frequent structures Sporadic misunderstanding in basic structures
Advanced	Comprehension of compound sentences in limited discourse Good control of morpho-syntax of the language Very accurate understanding of elementary structures Understanding of a native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners
Intermediate	Misunderstanding even in constructions which are simple and common Understanding of a native speaker used to dealing with foreigners
Novice	Little or no functional comprehension

Canale et al. present a similar table, considerably simplified, which combines listening and its printed partner, reading.[11] In addition, there is

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discussion under way to expand the Functional Trisection into a "Functional Quintesection," which for listening comprehension would add "Speaker Intent," what seems to be the purpose the native speaker(s) had in mind while speaking; and "Speaker Success," the degree to which the speaker(s) seem to have successfully communicated what was intended. For the moment, however, the Functional Trisection is of greatest practical value for the discussion to follow.

The ACTFL Guidelines have been carefully thought out and require mainly research into the appropriateness of individual test instruments at given proficiency levels. Since listening and speaking are closely linked, in actual classroom practice as well as in theoretical models, the guidelines for listening mirror those for speaking, with the qualification that the two skill areas are usually quite distinct in the individual learner. While we would like to think there is a high correlation between the two, this is rarely the case, even at the higher levels. After all, how many university professors transplanted to a foreign academic environment are able to talk about their subject matter field fluently in the foreign language, and also understand their colleagues completely?

5. What kinds of listening test items or instruments are most appropriate for testing listening comprehension at the various levels described in the ACTFL Guidelines?

My teaching experience tells me that there are four types of text materials that should be present in a listening comprehension proficiency instrument: dictation, monologues, dialogues, and songs. The first one is highly controversial, but can be eliminated from a test battery if there is danger of short-changing the other types. Dictations are tightly controlled, predominately writing-oriented listening activities. Dictations are admittedly discrete-point in their execution, but especially at the Novice and Intermediate levels, they can yield very basic useful information about the processing of linguistic information. At the Advanced and Superior levels dictation becomes *transcription*, an extremely difficult task, but one which can also tap fairly deep comprehension ability. Dictations are the most easily used listening comprehension proficiency test material.

Monologues are texts spoken by one speaker. Variables such as speaker age, sex, emotional state, etc., are thus relatively easy for the listener to deal with if they prove intrusive. Dialogues, on the other hand, present

several comprehension difficulties, since the interaction between two or more speakers can either improve or complicate the comprehension process. A listening comprehension test should be made up primarily of monologues and dialogues, with monologues presented first. Three or four short monologues, each with a different content/context, should be followed by two or three longer dialogues.

Song is a special category of listening material. The term refers here to any kind of listening enhanced by non-verbal sound, typically music (as in a lyric song), but also including chant, poetry reading, sermonizing, public address announcements, and most broadcast commercials, especially where a conscious effort is made to exaggerate the spoken message for emotional or financial reasons. A listening comprehension proficiency test should contain at least two or three such items, according to the level.

Here are some suggestions for these four types of listening material:

Dictations can be constructed to suit any proficiency level. At the Advanced and Superior levels, real, uncut listening texts should be used for transcription, since the listener will be operating almost exclusively within the target language milieu.

Examples of monologues can be found in the language normally presented on the radio. For the Novice level the candidate could be expected to understand station identification, short introductions to programs, time checks, and the like. At the Intermediate level the candidate should be able to comprehend weather reports, traffic reports, program previews, and brief public service announcements. At the Advanced level entire news broadcasts, radio plays, music and special events programs could be presented for comprehension activities. At the Superior level the candidate should comprehend editorials, special news and information programs, comedy, and debates.

Broadcast commercials present interesting challenges. Some work well at lower levels because of familiarity with the product or the relative "thinness" of the text. Others, even if they contain otherwise comprehensible structure and vocabulary, may be difficult to process because of speed of delivery or compression of speech patterns. But commercials are usually good examples of what I have defined here as song, and have the added advantage of being very short. It should be possible to use seven or eight of them in a test battery with little processing difficulty on the part of the candidate. They are also frequently quite motivating for students.

The basic testing procedure for listening comprehension proficiency would provide for a 20-30 minute tape of materials designed for testing at a given level. The tape would be accompanied by a worksheet which could be administered in writing (or orally if an examiner is to be present). At the Novice levels some physical activity, such as standing up, opening a window, etc., could be performed from the taped stimuli, or drawings or pictures could be presented for the candidate to identify on the basis of the recorded text.[18]

There are good administrative arguments for giving a multiple-choice test, such as those used in commercially available test batteries. However, more effective demonstration of comprehension could be elicited by having candidates respond to questions about the spoken test in their native language (at the Intermediate levels) or in the target language (at the Advanced Plus and Superior levels), to the extent that problems of reading comprehension did not interfere. If an examiner is to be present, it is possible for him or her to engage the candidate in a conversation, in the native or target language, about the content of the taped material.

A most promising technique for eliciting listening comprehension proficiency without prejudicing the outcome or contaminating the data, is the "immediate recall protocol," as suggested by Bernhardt for reading.[19] In preliminary research the protocol seems to be extremely effective for determining what students retain from the listening (or reading) experience, as long as they are allowed to give whatever information or reactions, in whichever language they wish. This immediately raises the question of test reliability, since it is not always possible to determine just exactly what information or reactions will or should be elicited from a spoken text passage, or, indeed, how to evaluate accurately what is produced.

Rating a sample of listening comprehension is still a matter of debate. If multiple-choice test items are used, a score that can be calibrated and statistically analyzed is possible. Better yet would be an examiner's judgment of the "functional success" of the candidate in exhausting his or her understanding of the material. Research needs to be done on the kinds of responses generated within the "immediate recall protocol" in order to determine which aspects of the Functional Trisection are most promising with regard to a long-term assignment of a level rating within the Proficiency Guidelines.

One last thought: as indicated earlier, it should be possible to use just

about any listening material for just about any teaching or testing purpose. The assumption all along has been that there are individual texts which are better for one level of proficiency than for another. However, it could be that one text may be useful for *all* levels of proficiency simultaneously, recognizing that different levels are defined in terms of what individual human beings do with a given language sample. In other words, the problems may not be to search through language material for a group of texts that are appropriate for Novice or Superior level candidates, but rather for texts that can elicit Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, *and* Superior level tasks. The division into monologues, dialogues, and songs (plus or minus dictation) seems to be a useful first step in producing a test battery for listening comprehension.

Notes

1. *ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines*, (Hastings-on-Hudson, NY: American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 1982)
2. Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, "The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines: A Historical Perspective," in *Teaching for Proficiency, The Organizing Principle*, Theodore V. Higgs, ed. (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1984), pp. 11-42.
3. Pardee Lowe, Jr., "The ILR Proficiency Scale as a Synthesizing Research Principle: The View from the Mountain," in *Foreign Language Proficiency in the Classroom and Beyond*, Charles J. James, ed. (Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company, 1985), pp. 9-54.
4. Stephen D. Krashen, Tracy D. Terrell, Madeline E. Ehrman, and Martha Herzog, "A Theoretical Basis for Teaching the Receptive Skills," *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984), pp. 261-80.
5. Kenneth Chastain, *Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice*, second edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), p. 278.
6. Heidi Byrnes, "The Role of Listening Comprehension: A Theoretical Base," *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984), pp. 317-30.
7. Lowe, pp. 35-40.
8. Harris Winitz, "A Reconsideration of Comprehension and Production in Language Training," in *The Comprehension Approach to Foreign Language Instruction*, Harris Winitz, ed. (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1981), pp. 101-40. See also his contribution to this volume.
9. For German the listening materials produced by Inter Nationes in Bonn, Federal Republic of Germany, come immediately to mind.
10. Charles J. James, "Are You Listening? The Practical Components of Listening Comprehension," *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984), pp. 329-33.
11. Michael Canale, James Child, Randall L. Jones, Judith E. Liskin-Gasparro, and Pardee Lowe, Jr., "The Testing of Reading and Listening Proficiency: A Synthesis," *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984), pp. 399-91.
12. Suggestions for the use of pictures in second-language listening comprehension exercises are outlined by Valerian A. Postovsky, "The Priority of Aural Comprehension in the Language Acquisition Process," in *The Comprehension Approach to Foreign Language Instruction*, Harris Winitz, ed. (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1981), pp. 154-69.
13. Elizabeth B. Bernhardt, "Testing Foreign Language Reading Comprehension: The Immediate Recall Protocol," *Unterrichtspraxis* 16 (1983), pp. 27-33.

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